Frank Lloyd Wright: Models in Exhibitions (1932-1949)

Carlos Montes Serrano
Sara Peña Fernández

Abstract

Frank Lloyd Wright always acknowledged the importance of models to make his work known among their clients. He was particularly active between the wars. Owing to the lack of commissions during this period, he promoted the publication of his work on specialized magazines, participated in several itinerant exhibitions, and published some books about himself and his ideas. In this context, models made for both clients and exhibitions were the best way to reach a wider audience. Not only are these models to be claimed as a medium, but also as a way to seduce and persuade the public of the qualities of his *Organic Architecture*.
Even though Frank Lloyd Wright's drawings have been widely covered by researchers, his full-scale architectural models have been neglected somehow. Fortunately, Kathryn Smith published her book Wright on Exhibit: *Frank Lloyd Wright's Architectural Exhibitions* in 2017. She attained to identify fifty seven models, some of which have been destroyed or disappeared, from different sources.
In this essay, we mean to study Wright's models in the exhibitions organized by the *Museum of Modern Art* in in New York during the 1930s and 1940s.

Keywords
Frank Lloyd Wright, models, MoMA, exhibitions

Topic
Persuadere

F.L.Wright at the Exhibition

(source: Mu- seum of Modern Art).

<http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Artifact%20Pages/PhotoJW.htm#0531.41>

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Three exhibitions in the 1930s

As it is known, the first architecture exhibition took place in the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York in February 1931, organized by Philip Johnson and Henry Rusell Hitchcock with the title *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* [Barr 1932]. Its original idea consisted in offering the public a major exhibition of the modern architecture which had started in Europe and had spread quickly throughout the United States of America and other countries; in such a way that it was already possible to speak of a new style, a new expression of the needs of the modern man and the ideals of a new era, *The International Style* [Hitchcock and Johnson 1932]. From the very first beginning, it was agreed that the exhibition would be on ten models by ten architects, since the models were the only way to make the exhibition attractive for an audience not knowledgeable in plan reading. Besides, ten photographs of the work of each architect would go with each model. Much more difficult was the choice of the ten most representative architects. It was clear that the European were Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Pieter Oud and Otto Haesler, the American were more uncertain. Eventually, Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Raymond Hood, Howe & Lescaze, and the brothers Bowman were selected [Riley 1992].

Neither Johnson nor Hitchcock were convinced that Wright should be included because they considered him a mere forerunner of the new architecture, whose late work showed symptoms of creative exhaustion. However, they also considered that the Committee Board could not allow themselves to exclude one of the most well-known architects in the United States. The choice of Wright, as usual, was not exempt from arousing a bitter controversy. Twenty days before the inauguration, Wright learned that Richard Neutra and Raymond Hood were participating, and he immediately asked Philip Johnson to be excluded because he considered that his presence could contribute to making them relevant; and he heartily disliked them [Pfeiffer 1987].

Lewis Mumford convinced him that he should be part of the exhibition because if not he would contribute to Raymond Hood and Richard Neutra being considered the most relevant modern architects in America [Pfeiffer y Wojtowicz 2001].

Wright took part with the model of a huge and luxurious house overlooking the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, the *House in the Mesa* (fig. 01: F.L. Wright, *House in the Mesa* - source: Museum of Modern Art; fig. 02: F.L. Wright, *House in the Mesa*. <http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Artifact%20Pages/PhotoJW.htm#0531.41>).

His model was exposed in the main room, next to the *Villa Savoye* by Le Corbusier and the *Tugendhat House* by Mies van der Rohe.

Wright's design clearly pretended to emulate the formal principles of the modern architecture. Therefore, there is a daring cantilever over one of the two swimming pools, a huge glass windows, flat roofs, the lack of applied decoration, or the new building systems, such as the *textile concrete block* that he had been using in his homes since 1921 [Wojtowicz 2005].

Because of all this, Wright's project was an excess. In addition to the waste of space for a luxurious detached house, it showed an obvious lack of proportion, a dreadful functional resolution of the floors, and an inadequate solution of the different volumes. The house overlooked the best views – the gardens, and the big pond – so these elevations were studied in detail; the long northern facade, however, lacked any charm in its composition. Finally, there was a problem of image: the project reminded more a social club than a home due to its size and layout.

Nevertheless, Wright never gave up the project, which was included in the design of the *Broadacre City* as a country house. The model would be with his visionary city in the exhibition in the *Rockefeller Centre* in April in 1935. It was also included in the itinerant great exhibition, *Sixty Years of Living Architecture Exhibition*, which took place in Europe and America between 1951 and 1956. The model was supposedly deteriorated because in 1953 Wright mentioned in a letter to a possible client that the model had been destroyed. It should be remembered that some years later, in February 1939, the Museum organized

the exhibition *Three Centuries of American Architecture* that included some photographs of Wright's works. Among them, there was the photograph of the *Robie House*, its plans and its model (fig. 03: F.L. Wright, *Robie House* - source: Museum of Modern Art).
The model, of a good size (125 x 23 cm), had been made for the exhibition *Trois Siècles d'art aux États Unis*, held in the *Galerie Nationale de Jeu de Paume* in Paris between May and July 1936.

Twenty models in the great exhibition in 1940

From November 1940 to January 1941 the exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright: American Architect*, took place in the Museum. It was thought as a retrospective show of the full vision of Wright's works on occasion of his 70th birthday. The responsible of the exhibition was John McAndrew, curator of architecture at the Museum from September 1937.
It could be read on the leaflet that in addition to the drawings, models of great size were included by Wright and his students of the *Taliesin Fellowship*. The models were meant to have a powerful effect, being able to dismantle in order to observe both the interior layout and furniture; likewise, outdoor space was recreated in detail, showing the site, cars, trees and vegetation [Reed, Kaizen 2004]. Firstly, a book was thought to be published, and a life-size model of one of his *Usonian* houses was thought to be built in the Sculpture Garden in the Museum. None of both ideas were carried out. Regarding the book, this and the catalogue had to gather a series of writings by architects and researchers of his work. But Wright opposed to the inclusion of the text by Walter Curt Behrendt unless certain passages were censored. The consequent controversy and Wright's threats were closed when Alfred Barr, director of the MoMA, ordered to do without the publication of the book [Smith 2017, p. 129]. The building of the house in the gardens was also abandoned since urban rules did not allow it. As a result, Wright felt extremely disappointed with the Museum.
Since Wright conceived the exhibition as the greatest until then, he chose hundreds of drawings and plans from his archives, and all the models he managed to gather, among which the one of *Broadacre City*, previously exposed in the *Rockefeller Centre* in 1935, was also included. When McAndrew allowed him to select the material, he lost the control of the exhibition; it was Wright himself who oversaw their display in the rooms in the Museum. This was quite unfortunate.
However strange, Wright had no clue about how museums used to show his works in temporary exhibitions. While the MoMA paid a lot of attention to how objects were chosen and displayed, Wright was in favor of exposing the largest number of works –since his first exhibitions in the *Chicago Architectural Club*– using panels on which plans, drawings and texts were hung. A picture of the exhibition shows how some drawings have been placed on mobile panels without any order. About the models, twenty were displayed; some were specially commissioned; others were kept from previous events [Fullaondo 2010, p. 54]. Among the latter, we can mention the models of *St. Mark's-in-the-Bouwerie Tower* for New York, 1930; *San Marcos Water Gardens* cabins in 193; *Malcolm Willey House* in 1933; *Robie House*, in 1936; *Johnson Administration Building* in 1936; and *Stanley Marcus House* in 1937.

Those built between 1939 and 1940 for the exhibition were *San Francisco Call Building*, his proposal of a skyscraper in 1912 but recreated in *Taliesin* in a larger size; *Herbert Jacobs House*; *Wingspread House* for Herbert F. Johnson; *Ralph Jester House* in Arizona (fig. 04: F.L. Wright, *Ralph Jester House* <http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Artifact%20Pages/PhotoJW.htm#0531.41>); *Sidney Bazett House; Suntop Homes; George Sturges House; Gregor Affleck House,* and *Lloyd Lewis House (*fig. 05: F.L. Wright, *Lloyd Lewis House* <http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Artifact%20Pages/PhotoJW.htm#0531.41>).

Besides, some models of details of *Broadacre City,* already shown in the 1935 exhibition, were developed in larger size: the houses *Usonia I*, a bridge over the highway, the solution for a crossroad, and the *Prefabricated Farm Unit*.
The exhibition could have been spectacular only with the models. It was a disaster, however. The display, arranged by Wright and his pupils in three days, was chaotic, disconcerting and

cramped. The reviews on both the newspapers and magazines were especially critical. At its best, the show was accused of improvisation and unintelligibility due to the lack of catalogue, poorly labeled works, etc.
There is a significant piece of data about the reaction of the Museum to the Wright's display. Although some photographs of the different exhibition are shown on the online *Exhibition History of the MoMA*, there is only one of this exhibition, the photograph by Soichi Sunami of the model *Lloyd Lewis House* placed near the glass window which opens towards the garden. It may be thought the Museum didn't show the photographs to avoid the record of the messed made by Wright.

The exhibition Tomorrow's Small House, 1945

Despite the fiasco of the retrospective exhibition, the MoMA was in charge again of his work in several collective exhibitions and in three individual ones of small size in the 1940s, although a model was displayed only in three.
In May 1945, the Museum organized the exhibition *Tomorrow´s Small House: Models and Plans.* The displayed material came from a magazine with a large circulation, the *Ladies' Home Journal,* which published since 1944 a monthly article showing the prototype of a detached house suitable for the postwar by showing color pictures of a model specially commissioned for the occasion. The magazine picked up the architects and oversaw the models, commissioning them in a good size and the same scale, looking for the greatest illusion of reality, with all the details of the interior furniture and exterior vegetation, materials, color and lighting, etc. Elizabeth Bauer Mock, the successor of McArthur in 1942 as the curator of architecture, selected nine models among the ones published by the magazine. The public warmly received the exhibition (fig. 06: *The Glass House at the Exhibition* - source: Museum of Modern Art).

It even gave rise to a certain debate in architecture magazines about the real possibility of building these houses at the price indicated.
Wright's prototype, called *The Glass House*, had been published on the June-1945 copy (fig. 07: F.L. Wright, *Glass House* - source: *Ladies' Home* Journal, 1945).

Once again Wright had to singled himself out in the exhibition of the MoMA, including another larger scale model of the glazed living room of the house (fig. 08: The living room of the *Glass House* - source: *Pencil Points,* 9, 1945).

Wright's model led to some possible commissions, although only one was finally carried out, *Lowell Walter Residence* in Iowa, also known as *Cedar Rock*, one of the best examples of *Usonian* houses built by the architect.

Two exhibitions of models

The success and simplicity of the small exhibition in January 1938, which was carried out from the photographs of the *Fallingwater*, incited Elizabeth Bauer to organize a similar event in June 1946. This consisted in showing the model of a new house: *A New Country House by Frank Lloyd Wright: A Scale Model*. This huge model (3.65 x 1.82 m) of the *Gerald Loeb House*, a spacious mansion on a hill in Connecticut that the financier Gerald Martin Loeb had commissioned to Wright two years before. His students of the *Taliesin Fellowship* built the model, which was paid by the Museum thanks to a donation by Gerald Loeb himself. Meantime, the magazine *Architectural Forum* (84, June 1946) featured an article on the project with photographs of the model by Ezra Stoller (fig. 09: F.L. Wright, *Gerald Loeb House* - source: Museum of Modern Art). Both the article and the model had the opposite effect on this occasion. The photographs showed the extravagance of Wright in detail (fig. 10: F.L. Wright, *Gerald Loeb House* - source: Architectural Forum).

Even the comment on *Architectural Forum*, trying to justify the inconsistency of the project following the Latin maxim, *Excusatio non petita accusatio manifesta*, ended being described as another oddity of Wright's artistic genius. Other comments were less kind, branding the project as surreal and a monstruous vulgarity [Smith, 2017:151].
After this polemic, Gerald Loeb cancelled the commission. As it can be supposed, Wright expressed his anger over the critical comments and he never thought if there was any grounding reason behind them. In fact, he tried to offer this same project to different clients, who sensibly rejected it. He put the blame on the lack of time to make the model, because of the pressures of the Museum to inaugurate in June. He also blamed the photographs of the interior by Stoller and the presentation on *Architectural Forum*. However, , the reality was that it was a ridiculous project, as it is evident nowadays when plans and the model are examined. Wright took the model to finish it to *Taliesin* and it seems that its legit owner, the MoMA, never wanted to recover it for its collection. In the autumn of 1946, Philip Johnson came back to the Museum, being called the new curator of architecture until his dismissal in 1951, in which he was replaced by Arthur Drexler.

In those five years, he organized two modest exhibitions of Wright. In April 1947 there was a small show with sixteen color photographs by Ezra Stoller of *Taliesin* and T*aliesin West*. And, in April 1949, an exhibition of only eleven days devoted to the design of a *New Theatre* by Wright showed four color drawings and a model which can be dismantled to appreciate the inside (fig. 11: F.L. Wright, New Theatre - source: Museum of Modern Art).
This was a project meant to be built in Hartford, Connecticut some months after. This never happened.

Conclusions

Wright was always interested in publishing his works on magazines and exhibitions. This is the reason why a large collection of extraordinary drawings and models by his collaborators exists. His eagerness was even more urgent in the 1920s and 1930s, when the economic crisis led to a decreasing clientele and the risk of being forgotten, or at least, being considered the architect of an earlier time.
The exhibitions in the MoMA of his work and the following difficulties allow us to know more about his personality traits. His prickly character and his selfishness made difficult what should be easy. Although latest research covers this at length, this tends to overindulge Wright's designs because the author has been seduced by the character, or because there is some fear to voice criticism against who was always qualified in his country as the "best American architect of all times".

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Authors
Carlos Montes Serrano, Department Urbanism and Architectural Representation. University of Valladolid, montes@arq.uva.es
Sara Peña Fernández, Department Urbanism and Architectural Representation. University of Valladolid, sararq96@gmail.com

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